

# Cree (First Nations) stop second phase of James Bay hydroelectric project, 1989-1994

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) indigenous participants](#) [1]
- [included innovative organizational forms/communication forms](#) [2]

## Timing

1989

to:

1994

## Location and Goals

Country:

Canada

Location City/State/Province:

Quebec

Location Description:

The majority took place in the province Quebec, although there was some action in Vermont, Maine, and New York

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Firstly, the Cree aimed to stop the construction of the second phase of the James Bay hydroelectric project. This campaign was part of the Cree's larger goal of gaining land rights and the right to self-determination.

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 041. Pilgrimages›odeyak river journey
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 089. Severance of funds and credit

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 089. Severance of funds and credit

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 089. Severance of funds and credit

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 089. Severance of funds and credit

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 089. Severance of funds and credit

Segment Length:

Approximately 10 months

## **Classifications**

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Environment

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- The Cree from Northern Quebec
- near the mouth of James Bay

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

The Grand Council of the Cree, which represents eight communities in the James Bay region, was created in response to the hydroelectric project and led the campaign against the dams. Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come led the campaign against the second phase of the dam.

External allies:

Sierra Club

National Audubon Society

Natural Resources Defense Council

Greenpeace

Earth First!

PROTECT

No Thank Q Hydro-Quebec

Student run divestment groups on U.S. campuses

Involvement of social elites:

New York City's Mayor announced his commitment to divest from Hydro-Quebec, inspiring other politicians to support the divestment

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Greenpeace
- No Thank Q HydroQuebec
- Sierra Club
- The Grand Council of the Cree

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Earth First!
- National Audubon Society
- PROTECT
- Student run divestment groups

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Natural Resources Defense Council

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

Approximately 10 months

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

Hydro-Quebec and the Government of Quebec

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

## **Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

10 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Campaign receives 10 points for success it completely stopped construction of the second phase of the James Bay hydroelectric project. It also caused the government to take the Cree into account when making decisions regarding their land. The Cree gained agency in deciding the future of their land and in their right to self-determination

In 1972, Matthew Coon Come, a young Cree student, happened upon a newspaper article that proclaimed Quebec's 'hydroelectric project of the century'. Looking at a map attached to the article, Matthew realized that his community's lands in northern Quebec were to be submerged by the proposed dam. It was in this way that the Cree learned of the upcoming assault to their land that had been commissioned by the Quebecois government. The Cree are an aboriginal people that reside in northern Quebec, around the mouth of James Bay. At that time, their livelihood depended upon the abundant fishing and hunting available to them in the region. The James Bay Hydroelectric Project proposed by Hydro-Quebec, the government run electricity company, would construct three major dams at James Bay. The project would supply electricity to millions of people, but would also submerge entire Cree communities and disrupt their fishing and hunting sources. The Cree way of life would also be disrupted by the road that would be built to connect their communities with the greater Quebec region. Yet, the Quebec government did not even give the Cree the courtesy of warning them of the impending project. The Cree were in no way taken into account in the planning process, and the assault on their land was not given a second thought.

Immediately after hearing of the project, the Cree organized a legal campaign to prevent the construction of the dams. In November of 1973, after a six-month court case, they won an injunction against the project. The historic ruling confirmed the Cree's right to their land, and, for a brief moment, it seemed as though the battle had been won. Yet, less than a week later, judges from the Quebec Court of Appeal overturned the ruling, stating that the Cree had given up the rights to their land in 1670, when King Charles II transferred the land to the Hudson's Bay Company and to the King's cousin, Prince Rupert. The ludicrous ruling seemed to suggest that the Cree had been squatters on their land for the past three hundred years. Importantly, it also allowed Hydro-Quebec to proceed with the hydroelectric project. The Cree continued their campaign by trying to reach out to Quebec citizens through the media, warning them of the dire environmental and social consequences of the James Bay project. However, at that point in time, environmental issues were not of primary concern to many people. The government had not even been required to conduct an environmental assessment of the project. In addition, the government succeeded in portraying the Cree as liars, stating that the Cree were attempting to stop the dams through a smear campaign of the government. Despite these setbacks, the Cree's legal campaign continued, and in 1974 eight Cree communities formed the joint Grand Council of the Cree. The Council's mandate was specifically to lead the campaign against the dams. The Council, made up mainly of Cree elders, decided to focus the campaign on continuing to fight the dams through legal means. Yet the Cree were left with few options—the first dam, La Grande Complex, was already being constructed, and a Supreme Court appeal hearing would not be resolved before its completion. As the destruction of their communities grew more serious every day, the Cree were forced to negotiate an agreement. On November 11

th

, 1975, the Cree signed the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) with the government.

The Cree were not able to stop construction of the first dam, which was completed in 1981. However, in return

for allowing the construction of the first dam to take place, the Agreement guaranteed the Cree services such as health care and education, and protection of their fishing, hunting, and trapping sources. Yet the government failed to deliver on many of these promises and the Cree spent the next decade fighting to acquire what had been guaranteed to them by the JBNQA. This historic agreement, which was the first of its kind in recognizing an aboriginal people's right to determination, did little to prevent the slow destruction of the Cree way of life.

In 1989, Phase 2 of the James Bay project was announced, and the Cree responded immediately. Cree communities across Quebec sent over a hundred leaders to meet in Montreal to discuss the proposal for the second dam. After the Cree's dismal experience with the first phase of the project and the government's failure to deliver on its promises, the leaders voted resoundingly to oppose the second dam. They gave a mandate to the Grand Council to use any means necessary to oppose the construction of the second phase of the project. The Council was now led by younger members that in its first campaign, headed up by the dynamic Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come. This new leadership decided that the key to success would be in bringing the issue into the homes of the Canadian and American public. Previous leaders had focused on a legal battle that removed most Cree from involvement with the campaign and had little impact on people outside of the case; this new leadership turned directly to the Cree people to be part of the campaign and to the public for its support. Thus, the Cree's direct action campaign began in 1989, when the Council decided to move away from legal means and focus on nonviolent direct action tactics.

Though the vast majority of the electricity created by the James Bay project would be directed to Canada, a small amount was to be sold to regions of the northeastern United States. This portion of the electricity was to be sold to American governments at a much higher price than the electricity sold in Canada, and was to provide much of the revenue for the project. The Grand Council reasoned that if they could get several American states to back out of their agreements with Hydro-Quebec, the project would be in danger. And so they focused their media and educational campaigns both in Canada and in the United States. As part of the new wider-reaching campaign, the Grand Council formed partnerships with several environmental groups in Canada and the United States. However, though the Cree established relationships with these groups, they were careful to keep their respective campaigns separate. The Cree did not fund any environmental groups, and did not receive funding from any outside groups. In this way, they could cooperate with groups like Greenpeace, Sierra Club, and the Audubon Society, but were still able to conduct their campaign under Cree leadership. They gained the prestige, publicity, and credibility associated with outside environmental groups, but maintained autonomy in their campaign. The Grand Council also encouraged the creation of student groups on college campuses. Just as they did for anti-apartheid divestment campaigns, student groups on many American campuses successfully lobbied for their college or university to divest from Hydro-Quebec. This proved to be the first major blow to the electric company.

A central part of the campaign's strategy was to enable the public to relate to the Cree's issues and opposition to the dam. To do this, the Grand Council undertook several educational campaigns to spread awareness about the Cree way of life. They commissioned a film about the forestry industry and the hydroelectric development projects in Quebec, and distributed the film across the U.S. and Canada. They showed the film on local channels, in coordination with local presentations on the issue. These events, along with the posters and T-shirts that were distributed, helped raise the campaign's profile among Canadian and American citizens.

In the spring of 1990, the Grand Council began their biggest action yet: they built a 24 foot long odeyak

(a boat that is a kayak in the stern and a canoe in the bow) and began paddling to New York City. Along the way, events were held in local churches and town halls. Both local press and Canadian press followed the story,

and the expedition received a warm welcome at every stop. The trip culminated with the expedition's arrival in New York City on Earth Day, and with bringing the

odeyak

on stage in Times Square at the Earth Day Concert. Though the campaign had already reached a high level of publicity, the Grand Council's bold and creative action catapulted their cause onto the front page. The Council was able to secure a meeting with New York City's mayor, and gained his endorsement of a cancellation of New York's contract with Hydro-Quebec. His endorsement helped gain support among other politicians, and in 1992 New York politicians voted to cancel their state's electricity contract with Hydro-Quebec. This proved to be a turning point in the campaign: after New York pulled out, several other states either cancelled or greatly reduced their contracts. Finally, it was Hydro-Quebec's turn to be in trouble—they had already been experiencing financial problems related to the James Bay project, and now several of their key sources of revenue had pulled out.

In November of 1994, lack of funds combined with intense pressure from environmental groups and a sway in public opinion lead the Quebecois government to announce the indefinite postponement of the second phase of the James Bay project. The Cree, through their innovative and determined campaign, had succeeded. The Grand Council adeptly publicized their campaign and gained the support of the wider public. They cooperated with environmental groups, earning the groups' credibility but without losing their own autonomy. The Council had learned from the failures of their legal campaign, and went on to protect their land from further intrusion by using direct action tactics. In 2001, the Cree negotiated with the Quebecois government and signed an agreement allowing construction of the third phase of the project. The agreement, however, was on the Cree's terms. They demanded that it be built in such a way as to protect their lands, and that it create jobs for their people. Cree communities were able to vote on the project, and defend their agency in the determination of their land.

## Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

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